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AUTHOR Wright, Gloria O.
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ABSTRACT

There is nothing in American society to prepare women for aging. It has been proposed that the status that the aged hold in any culture diminishes when modernization, an increased number and proportion of elderly, or rapid social change is present. All three of these conditions exist in American society. Women face many dangers, especially as they age, including crime and rape, drugs and drug abuse, quacks and fradulent schemes, lack of knowledge, ignorance of alternatives, ignorance of resources, ignorance of the aging process itself, lack of education and training, low income, and poverty. Most elderly women will experience widowhood, and loneliness is a danger that impacts heavily on them. Women may be afraid of change and afraid of taking risks. Consequently, they may miss opportunities or may not even recognize opportunities for what they are. Aging should be an adventure. Preparation can make it an exciting adventure. To prepare for aging, it may be useful to: (1) develop a positive attitude toward aging, retirement, and life; (2) make the best possible financial preparation; (3) maintain good health through proper diet, exercise, and rest; (4) enjoy hobbies; (5) maintain a sense of humor; (6) continue to learn; (7) strengthen family ties; (8) avoid boredom; (9) learn to control anger, frustration, and stress; (10) develop friendships; (11) gain a knowledge of the aging process; and (12) accept aging as a natural part of life. (NB)

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ADVENTURES OF AGING

Gloria O. Wright

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Gloria O. Wright

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Paper presented at the NASW National Conference on Women's Issues
Atlanta, GA, May 28-31, 1986.

ADVENTURES OF AGING

Good morning! It is my pleasure to be with you this morning. This conference is a great opportunity for women and I very much appreciate being able to be a part of it. I've chosen for my topic this morning, "The Adventures of Aging."

How is your attitude about aging? Are you dreading it or are you planning and preparing to enjoy every day and every experience of your life as a new adventure? My American College Dictionary gives 11 different definitions of adventure. Let me present 5 of them to you: 1. An undertaking of uncertain outcome. 2. Participation in exciting undertakings or enterprises. 3. To venture. 4. To take the risk involved. 5. An exciting experience. Aging is all of these. Aging <u>is</u> an adventure, and it began the day you were born.

How many of your parents or grandparents told you exactly what to expect from aging - that great time of life that Robert Browning talked about when he said, "Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be, the last of life for which the first was made." No matter what anyone else has told you or tried to prepare you for, there are two things that no one is ever fully prepared for: the first is being a parent, and the second is being old, but that doesn't mean that we shouldn't prepare as much as we possibly can.

I remember my grandparents being old. I thought that they had always been old, but I don't really remember them telling me anything about aging. The only thing that I remember hearing from my parents was the time when my father was sitting in his easy chair and he placed the evening newspaper on the floor in front of him. Then looking down through his bifocals he said, "I'll bet you can't do this. I can read the newspaper clear from here!" He was right, I couldn't.

Aging is so subtle. In the 25 years that I was raising my 6 children I saw them every night when they went to bed and I looked at them again every morning when they got up, and never once in those 25 years did I ever say, "Oh, my goodness, look how so and so has changed;" and they never said, "Oh, look how Mom has changed." But each child was changing and aging and so was I.

Last year my husband and I went to our oldest son's house for his 31st birthday. As we were walking up the front walk his little 4-year old girl, our granddaughter, came running out to meet us. She said, "It's my dad's birthday, and he's <u>really old</u>.

Do you know what an older person is? It's someone who is 8 years older than you are. So to her he was <u>really old</u>. Aging is also a relative thing depending on where you're at. It's like noise pollution. Someone said that in the city noise pollution is like a jet plane taking off, but in a monastery it's a pen that scratches. When aging happens to someone else it may be a scratchy pen, but when it happens to us it is like a hundred jet planes taking off.

You're all familiar with what has come to be known as "The graying of America." Our older population is increasing twice as fast as the rest of the population. The fastest growing group among the older population is the group over 85. Just since 1900 the lifespan for women jumped 26 years (from 48 years in 1900 to 79 years today). Many of us may live to be 100. By the year 2020, if projections are correct, it will not be uncommon to live to be 110. In ancient Egypt, one of the nicest things someone could wish another was to be 110. We have added years to our lives. Now we must find ways to add life to those years.

In our youth-oriented society we see beautiful young women advertising everything from furs to furniture and from cars to cosmetics. We see elderly women advertising pills for stomachaches, headaches, arthritis, constipation, adhesives for dentures, etc. There is nothing in our youth-oriented society to prepare women for aging.

Women are not seeing the whole of life, and the parts they are seeing are often distorted. This leaves women in our society ill-prepared for aging. It's like the woman in her 40's who looked into the mirror and said, "Mirror, mirror on the wall, lie to me! She wanted to look like the TV commercials. If she thought it was aging that made her look bad she must never have had a picture taken for her driver's license or for a passport. Someone said that if you look like your passport photo you really need the trip.

Pat Moore, a 26-year-old woman from New York City took a course in gerontology, the study of aging. She decided that she wanted to discover firsthand the problems that are faced by the elderly. Through a complicated procedure with latex foam she was able to wrinkle and age her face. With a heavy fabric binding her body, and a gray wig on her head she became 85 years old.

She had some interesting experiences. She tried to get cabs on the street. Taxi after taxi would flash past, all empty. Eventually one would stop. One morning, standing in line at a ticket counter she heard the ticket agent exclaim brightly, "Good morning," to each one in front of her. When

she stood before the agent all she got was a look at her ticket, a low mumble and "Next please."

She attended a conference on aging. The conference was attended mostly by young professionals who were there to study the problems of the elderly. The participants seemed to completely ignore the only "old lady" in their midst. One of the young men offered coffee to some of the younger women. Then she became angry. She had been condescended to, ignored, and counted out in a way she had never known before.

In her neighborhood drugstore she asked for a stomach medicine. The owner pointed over his shoulder and said, "Back there, bottom shelf." "Can you help me find it?," she asked. Looking annoyed he walked to the shelf and pointed again. She reached down and picked up the bottle. The writing was so small on the bottle that she asked, "Could you please read the directions for me?" In irritation he rattled them off. She was afraid to ask him anything else.

The next morning she returned to the store as her 26-year-old self. The same owner greeted her cheerfully, "How can we help you today?" She asked again for the same stomach medicine. Smiling, he said, "It's right over here and escorted her to the shelf, kneeled down, picked up the bottle and carefully explained the directions, the sizes in which it came and the prices. Then he rang up the sale and wished her a fine day.

Pat Moore became that 85-year-old woman 1 day a week for 3 years. She visited 14 states and met hundreds of people. Some of her experiences were good, but most of them were bad. Once she was hurled to the ground by several laughing youngsters who beat her as they yanked away her purse. The mugging left her with a fractured wrist, a deep fear of being out after dusk, and a clear idea of why the elderly often become homebound. Some of her greatest kindnesses came from little children and from the elderly themselves.

Donald Cowgill did research in many different cultures and came up with a theory that has great credibility. He said that the status that the aged hold in any culture diminishes when any of the following characteristics are present:

1. Modernization
2. Increased number and proportion of elderly
3. Rapid social change

All 3 of these characteristics are present in our society. Our society could be labeled hazardous to the health of the elderly.

Being old in and of itself does not necessarily harbor danger, but in our present-day society it can if we are not prepared for it. I started working with a 16-year-old girl about 6 months ago. I asked her what she wanted to do with her life. She said, "Graduate from high school and die." I wasn't sure if she believed in life after death and thought she needed a high school diploma for that or if she thought that school was going to kill her, but I tried to convince her that there is life after high school. You are all familiar with the statistics on teenage suicide. These young people are too young to die. We must give them reasons to live. Part of my job is to motivate young people to get their education so that they can be prepared for life.

Today many young women are not completing their education. I cannot overemphasize the importance of education for women, not only for aging but for survival. The education of women should be one of our major concerns today. If something gets in the way of that we should get concerned. The main things that I see getting in the way of the education of young women are: some types of music, drugs, and sexual activity. I have seen straight A students turn into F students when they become involved in these things. Aristotle said that the best provision for old age is education. Many of our young women are going to be illiterate not only in the knowledge of aging but also in the knowledge that they need for life.

Let me mention a few other things that are a danger to women. Crime and rape are a danger to women. Basing what I say on personal cases that I have worked with, I am not able to understand how we can stir up the sexual appetites in our society without any consequences. I grew up in a neighborhood of small streets and alleyways and walked alone day and night everywhere I went without fear. The word "rape" seldom , if ever appeared in our newspaper. Today every woman faces that fear. Many of the experiences of young innocent incest victims have been directly traceable to the molester's use of pornographic material.

Many very young girls are sexually active. Recently I became aware of three girls, aged 11, 12, and 15 involved in sexual promiscuity, pornography, and prostitution. I see our sex-saturated society as a great danger to women. Young girls are experiencing epidemic infections, sexually transmitted diseases, and serious gynegological problems that are requiring hospitalization for D & C's and hysterectomies.

Drugs and drug abuse are a danger to women. Quacks and fraudulent schemes are a danger to women. Elderly women are a most vulnerable group. An 80-year-old widow in Chicago didn't suspect a thing when a contractor said that she had a leaky toilet and other plumbing problems, and that her hot water heater was going to blow up, and that her thermostat was crooked and her chimney needed redone, or that it would cost $50,000 to fix the problems. The woman went to the bank and withdrew half that amount. Luckily an alert bank clerk summoned a police officer so that her money was saved, but by the time the police got to her home an 8-man crew had already torn up her basement.

Let me mention some things that are a danger to women, especially as they age: lack of knowledge, ignorance of alternatives, ignorance of resources, ignorance of the aging process itself, lack of education and training, low income, and poverty.

A woman, who is now in her 40's, lost her husband in a car accident 5 years ago. She and her family were devastated. She had 3 children under 11 and was 7 months pregnant. She had no skills and was left heavily in debt. She said to me, "Have you ever tried to get a job when you were 7 months pregnant and had no skills. Today, 5 years later, she and her 4 children are barely surviving. Those 5 years have left scars upon her and her children that may never heal.

Most elderly women will experience widowhood, and loneliness is a danger that impacts heavily on them. One half of women over 60 live alone. Of all persons alone over 65, 80% are women. The death rate of widows is 10 times higher during their 1st year of bereavement. There are about 25,000 excess deaths a year from the effects of bereavement. The loss and loneliness are profound.

Aloneness is different than loneliness. I worked with an 80-year old woman who had lost her husband. She had been a widow for 14 years. After her husband's death she was so lonely and grieved so intensely that she developed ulcerative colitis. One day she decided that she had allowed herself to become a very unhappy woman. She also decided that unhappiness was worse than loneliness. She busied herself and began to rebuild her life and became a much happier woman.

Loss and loneliness also come through divorce. During the first year after a divorce the illness rate is 12 times higher than normal. With the increasing divorce rate, women have increased their danger in this area, and divorce can change one financially well-off family into two poor families. Poverty is poverty, whatever the cause, and it is a great danger to women,

and one that more and more women are having to face. I see a new idea emerging among some of the young women I work with that could contribute to future divorces. One girl said, "You mean you have been married for 30 years to the same man, how boring! I wonder if Romeo and Juliet or Anthony and Cleopatra would have thought it boring? I have not found it boring.

In this year's March-April issue of our Social Work Journal there was an article titled "Spouseless, Childless Elderly Women and Their Social Supports." Let me read a few lines from that article: (Quote) "Women who face old age without a spouse or child lack the two most important sources of social support for the elderly. Compared to those with husbands and children, these women may be more vulnerable to isolation, neglect, and institutionalization. .... Moreover, higher divorce and lower fertility rates in recent years suggest that in the future, many aged women will be without a spouse and an available child." (Unquote)

There are so many changes in our society, and changes can bring opportunities or dangers. We need to be sure that the changes we make and allow society to make will be opportunities and not dangers for women.

Women may be afraid of change and afraid to risk and miss their opportunities. They may not recognize the opportunities for what they really are.

I remember an experience my brother had some years ago. He loved to travel and would get so excited about everything and he didn't want his children to miss anything. He was always pointing and saying to his children, "Oh, look at that, and look at that!" He had a great enthusiasm for life. One year when he took his family to Yellowstone Park in Wyoming he tried to prepare his children for Old Faithful - that geyser that explodes once about every hour and shoots a huge fountain of water up to the sky. He had told his children how magnificent it was. They stood just waiting for it to go off getting more excited every minute. When it finally erupted, his one young boy, looking up at him, very disappointed, said, "It's only water." We need to help women recognize their opportunities.

This is the greatest time in the history of the world to be alive. Opportunities for women have never been greater. It is not only an exciting time to be alive, it is also an exciting time to grow older in. Women have the chance to be healthier today than ever before. Women are living longer. Their elderly years can be more productive. We have more choices that we can make. There has never been so much knowledge available.

It used to be that when women were through raising their families they graduated to the rocking chair. Now they are graduating from college. Women used to just drift into the later years. Now there is so much knowledge available about aging and the aging process. We can learn and know things about aging that our parents and grandparents never dreamed of knowing or understanding.

Women today have time for nearly everything they want to do if they space it out and plan their lives. A lot of young women are falling apart trying to do it all and have it all right now - education, home, family, career, and they are paying a heavy price. They are experiencing a lot of pressure and stress trying to cope with the busyness of their lives as they try to do everything and be everything right now. They don't have to do everything and be everything right now. We are the first generation of women to have so many available things to choose from to do and a longer lifetime to do them. If we plan well and space our activities across the lifespan, what a trip we can have!

Barbara McClintock was the first woman to receive the Nobel Prize for Medicine. She received it in 1983 in her 80's. For 30 years people had called her mad - absolutely crazy. She said that she could hardly wait to get up in the morning to do research in her laboratory. She loved what she was doing. I remember reading of another woman in her 80's who said she could hardly wait to get up in the morning to work on her scrapbooks. Every woman needs to find something that she loves doing so much that she can hardly wait to get up in the morning to do it.

One elderly woman that I worked with had had a very busy active life in a career that she loved. When she was no longer able to work she locked herself into her past with her memories. She did not have any other interests she could turn to and enjoy. Help women to expand their interests. Help them to begin to do things that they will be able to do and enjoy doing when they are no longer able to do exactly what they are doing now.

Aging is an adventure. We can make it an exciting adventure if we prepare for it and realize that it is worth preparing for. Most people prepare for a journey that they are going to take. If you could take the trip of a lifetime, anywhere that you wanted to go, to the most exotic place on earth that you can imagine, you'd rush right down to the airport and get on the plane and tell the pilot to take you there, right? Wrong!

You need to get some information about the territory. How much money are you going to need? How about getting the body in shape? How about a passport, visas, shots? Do you want to go all alone? A trip is

usually more fun if it is shared with someone. How much baggage are you going to take, and what kind? You for sure don't want to be burdened down hauling a lot of unnecessary baggage on your trip. You want to enjoy the journey - the trip of a lifetime. There are going to be a few unknowns, but life is full of those. Don't let the unknowns lessen your enthusiasm for the journey.

We need to prepare for aging, the journey of a lifetime, as much as any trip we ever plan to take. We need to get all of the information we can about the territory. We need to plan for the trip financially. A retired person needs about 70% of preretirement income to live as they have been used to living. Eating for optimum health and having a regular exercise program will help us to have a much better time. Building relationships with friends and family will greatly enhance the journey. We can cut down on the unnecessary baggage by overcoming habits we don't want to take with us, and by getting rid of our hangups, our guilt, and by resolving our problems as they arise. We can begin now to create a happy attitude, and dare to risk a little and not be afraid.

I remember reading about Hugues de Montalembert, an artist. He was mugged and had been blinded in the assault. He had experienced the pain and the anger and the blindness wanting to die, but he worked his way through the ordeal and came to this conclusion: "The only real darkness is fear." It is my hope that we can take the fear out of aging for women by providing knowledge and hope, and by creating some excitement for the adventure of the journey.

I was very interested in a newspaper article that was written in 1984. It told about two celebreties, Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot. It told about their attitudes and their outlook on life as they were both turning 50. Sophia Loren said that after half a century her birthday was a wonderful thing. She said, "You're born, you grow older and there's nothing wrong with it. I have no regrets. I appreciate so much what I have. Life always has fresh beginnings." She said, "In life you have to work and do creative things and keep busy." She had just published a new book and had a new perfume on the market. Brigitte Bardot said that her 50 years had been awash with tears. She had become reclusive and depressed. She said, "It's tough to age, it's half a century." She had retired 11 years before at the age of 39. She seldom shows her face in public and hides behind sunglasses. On her 49th birthday she tried to kill herself.

A year ago I was the director of what was called "The Meadows Project." This was a state-funded research project in which I interviewed the elderly low-income residents of an apartment complex called The

Meadows. The purpose of the project was to assess the needs of the residents and help them to develop independent living skills. The complex consisted of 75 people, 90% of whom were women. All but 4 of these women lived alone. The average age was 74 with the oldest being 93. As long as these residents were able to be independent on their own or with the help of outside resources they could remain in residence. When they were no longer able to do that they had to leave. This was their home and they wanted to stay there. Before the start of the project quite a few residents had had to experience inappropriate or premature nursing home placements. Some of the residents had family support, but some had absolutely no one to help them if help should be needed. Some of the families of the residents had stretched themselves to the limit and were already looking at nursing home placements.

Two women were completely independent and said that they never needed help. They were in good health. Both of them went for walks outside everyday. They almost resented anyone thinking that they might not always be able to care for themselves. Within the first two months of the project, one of these women had a serious fall and the other a serious illness. They were both hospitalized, and without help they would have been unable to return to their own homes. They both called me and were most anxious to find out what resources were available to help them to return home. With a little help they were able to do that and did not have to be placed in a nursing home.

The results of the project found that with knowledge and education, and sometimes a little help from appropriate resources, women can live independently and that inappropriate or premature nursing home placements can be prevented. This kind of help can allow women to remain in their own homes where the vast majority want to be and where they are much happier and do much better.

Let me introduce you to a few of my friends:

Mrs. A. was about 72 years old. She was happy and contented. She went to the senior citizen's center and took painting classes, but she spent most of her time at home. She painted when she wanted, she rested when she wanted , she watched TV when she wanted, but her daughter felt that her mother needed more things to keep her busy. Mrs. A. resented the efforts of her daughter in trying to get her to do more things. Mrs. A. had a large stuffed teddy bear that sat in one of the large chairs in her living room. She had asked her family for the bear for Christmas. Some of her

family had not been too happy about it but they gave it to her. She told me how much she had enjoyed having the bear and that it was company for her.

Mrs. H. was in her 80's. A stroke left her partially paralyzed and she had had to be placed in a nursing home. One day when I visited her the nurse brought her a pill that had been crushed in applesauce. She didn't want to take it, but the nurse was forcing her to. Mrs. H. told me later, and she had to struggle to speak because of the effects of the stroke, that it wasn't the pill that she hated to take, but she hated the applesauce. The nurse had never taken the time to let her get the words out to find out that she hated applesauce. Those who work with the elderly need to be sensitive. Everyone is not the same, nor are their needs the same.

I worked with the elderly for awhile in an alternatives to nursing home placement program. It was an excellent program. One morning Mrs. K. called me. Someone had just told her about our program and she called out of desperation. She was in her early 40's. She had been caring for her 83-year old mother for about 2 years. Mrs. K., herself, had serious health problems. Her doctor had told her that she was a high-risk candidate for a heart attack. She was having marital problems and was trying to save the marriage. She had been very depressed and had considered suicide, but she loved her mother and was trying her very best to care for her while she was also caring for her own family of 4 children. I visited with her and told her about the alternatives program and assessed her needs and her mother's needs. Our program was able to provide 4 hours of care a week to help with the bathing and personal care of her mother. The family paid the total cost of the service which came to about $100 a month, a tenth, or less, of what it would have cost if the mother had had to have been placed in a nursing home. The daughter wanted her mother in her home, and the mother was happier being ther. I talked to Mrs. K. a few weeks after the service was started and she said, "You can't imagine what a difference it has made in my life. I feel like I can handle things now."

Verlie was in her 70's. She loved to garden and so the managers of the apartment complex where she lived let her plant and care for a large rose garden that was a great asset to the area. Everyone in the complex appreciated the beautiful roses and the work that she put into it. Verlie also played the piano and brought music into the lives of many other people.

Jaunita writes beautiful poetry and a commercial firm buys it and prints it on their postcards. She also loves to get up in the morning and work on her scrapbooks. She has filled 39 of them. She once told me, "I have always had to work so hard. It's so nice now to be able to do what I

want, and I don't have to worry about my children all the time." Now she can spend time with her poetry and her scrapbooks and some of the other things that she likes to do. She is in her late 70's and having the time of her life.

A recent national survey that was conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics found that on a five-point scale of excellent to poor, 70 percent of the people over 65 and living alone rated their health as good or better and 18 percent listed their health as excellent. Not all ill people are old, and not all old people are ill.

I worked with a 70-year old woman who had trouble with sores in her mouth off and on for years from wearing dentures. She told me that when she was a new bride at the age of 21 she was sick. She went to the doctor and he told her that she had an infection and wouldn't get over it until she had all of her teeth pulled. He sent her to a dentist who pulled all of her teeth and replaced them with the dentures. A little later it was discovered that she had had tonsilitis. She has gone through most of her life without teeth because of a lack of correct knowledge. Maybe we can help women to avoid these kinds of experiences.

It used to be a common belief that it was your teeth that made you sick. History is replete with cases of quackery that was made up of the latest and best knowledge that was available. We need to be careful not to jump on the bandwagon with every new idea or fad that comes along. However, we are so fortunate today. We have made great advances in knowledge and medicine. That knowledge can help us to know what natural changes come with aging. Don't always use or accept the excuse, "Oh, it's just because I'm getting old."

One client told me, "Don't ever get old," but she never gave me a satisfactory alternative to that. She was in much better health and circumstances than most of the elderly I worked with. Most of the days I visited her she apologized for the way she looked. I thought she looked fine. She was neat and clean and had on lovely clothes. Her hair was always styled and beautiful. She had makeup on and I would never have really noticed what she was so constantly aware of if she had not called attention to it. She always said, "My face is so wrinkled."

It's like a picture that I use to show the young girls with whom I work. In the middle of a large manila envelope is a hole about the size of a quarter. All that you can see is a car with its lights on. Most of these girls are so anxious to get their drivers licenses. They want to drive! They can relate to that. That is the circle of their concern. I have to lift the paper

out of the manila envelope to show them the larger picture and talk to them about laws and road signs, and safety and danger, and mountains and valleys, and houses by the side of the road, so that they can see the whole picture. No matter what we are doing we need to see the whole picture. So it is with the journey into aging.

The things that have been of the most concern to the elderly whom I have worked with have been loneliness, limited income, the limited amount of time that they are able to spend with busy family members, and circumstances that can often be made better if they are planned and prepared for ahead of time.

I have a list of 12 things that I believe are some of the most valuable things that we can do to prepare for aging. It includes:

1. Develop a positive attitude toward aging, retirement, and life.
2. Make the best possible financial preparation.
3. Maintain good health by eating nourishing food, by having a regular exercise program, and by getting the right amount of sleep.
4. Have some hobbies, and develop some new ones.
5. Maintain a sense of humor.
6. Continue to learn; take classes or study things of interest.
7. Strengthen family ties.
8. Avoid boredom.
9. Learn to control anger, frustration, and stress.
10. Develop friendships.
11. Gain a knowledge of the aging process.
12. Accept aging as a natural part of life.

You social workers, with your innate desire to help others, and with the skills you have learned in listening and empathizing and in decision making and problem solving, and with your knowledge of alternatives and resources, are the best prepared and in the most advantageous position to help women have a successful journey into aging. I would challenge you to

help make the journey into aging a better one for the women you know and work with, and I wish all of you a very good trip - a most pleasant journey!

Handouts - Longevity Worksheet

Diana A. Wright, M.S.W.